

Behavior and Communication

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One of the most effective ways to communicate a message is through behavior. You hand a book to a small child and the child pushes it away. The behavior is communicating he does not want the book. A child takes you by the hand and leads you to the refrigerator; the child is hungry. A child is crying; the child is unhappy. All the behaviors we see in children, teens and adults communicate a message to us.

All behavior serves a purpose -- that purpose is communication. Many of the students with limited communications skills have difficulty expressing themselves. Therefore, a student uses any form of communication possible to effectively get his message across to others. It is very common for students to use their behaviors to communicate. Sometimes the behavior is very subtle, other times the behavior can be aggressive or socially unacceptable. When a student uses a behavior for communication, the behavior communicates one of two basic messages: "I want something" or "I want to get away from something."

If your child becomes aggressive or exhibits a socially unacceptable behavior, how do you make it stop or go away? Typical responses from an adult would be to tell the child "No," to take away something the child likes, or to respond in a physical way by doing something such as making the child sit in a quiet corner. These responses may stop the behavior for a while, but eventually the same behavior will return or a new behavior will take its place.

Why does a child continue to exhibit a behavior that is not appropriate or is a socially unacceptable way of communicating a message? The child has learned that the behavior works better than any other form of communication she has tried. A behavior will only continue to occur if the behavior accomplishes what the child is seeking.

When the adult uses traditional responses to manage an inappropriate behavior, he never finds out what the behavior was communicating. To really understand why the behavior is happening, we must know what the child is communicating.

Remember, a behavior in one situation may communicate a different message than in another situation. For example, knocking things off the kitchen table may mean "I'm done," knocking things off the coffee table may mean "Stop watching TV and pay attention to me," and knocking things off the desk at school may mean "I don't want to do this anymore."

A simplified process for managing behavior in a more positive manner.

1. First, select a behavior:
 - a. Don't start with the most difficult or severe behavior.
 - b. Start with a simple behavior so both you and your child can be successful.
2. Decide why the behavior is happening, what message is being communicated:
 - a. Is the child trying to get something or to get away from something?
 - b. Also, are adult actions or demands too strict or demanding so that a compromise needed?
3. Find a better way for the student to communicate the message:
 - a. The new way must be as effective and as fast as the current behavior. If not, the child will revert to the old behavior and not use the new way.
4. Teach the new way to your child:
 - a. You will have to set up situations and prompt or help your child through the process.
 - b. This way your child learns to be successful and can see that the new way of communicating is more powerful and useful than the old behavior.

5. Help your child use the new behavior in typical situations:
 - a. Remain calm and prompt your child to use his new form of communication.
 - b. Understand that your child will not use the new way to communicate all the time.
 - c. Your child will need to learn that this way is the best way to communicate.

Example of implementing a new behavior

Your child is constantly knocking things off the coffee table. You have tried the old traditional approach -- told him to stop, threatened him, took away something he likes, or used "time out"

-- but the behavior still continues no matter what you do.

What is the message?

The most difficult part is trying to figure out the message. It is useful to remember that the basic messages are either that your child wants something or wants to get away from something. The problem is deciding what the child really wants or wants to get away from. In this example, let's guess the message is "I want you to pay more attention to me." This may sound odd, but many children want any type of attention they can get even if it is negative attention. Because this behavior has been constantly occurring, it means that the behavior is working for your child because you consistently direct your attention away from your activity and respond.

Decide on a new way to communicate your child's message.

One new way of communicating could be having your child bring you a card with a picture of two people on it; this card means "I want to play or have more attention from you." Explain and demonstrate to your child that when she gives you the card, you will stop what you are doing, and the two of you will play for five minutes. You will set a timer to indicate the end of play time.

Practice the new behavior until your child uses it most of the time.

Initially, your child may continue to knock things off the coffee table. You must continue to teach and show your child that she achieves the intent of the communication (getting to play) most effectively using the card system. You need to focus on teaching the new behavior and avoid commenting on the old behavior. If your child knocks things off the coffee table, quickly hand her the card and help her hand the card to you. Then say: "Oh, you want to play. Let's go play," and go play. Don't say anything about what has been knocked off the table. Don't make her pick it up. You want her to see that the card will get her what she wants, which is your attention. It will take many times to change the old behavior. Remain calm during this process and provide opportunities for your child to be successful.

Extending the process:

Your child may seek your attention at other times during the day. By having these cards all over the house, your child can get to them quickly and easily and use them to communicate a need for attention when you are busy with something else. If your child has to look for a card and it takes too long, he will revert to the old way to communicate what he wants.

The two questions parents ask when they are thinking about implementing this type of positive support:

Q: *How do I know when my child is going to exhibit either aggression or a socially unacceptable behavior? My child's behavior just comes out of the blue without a warning.*

A: Typically, there are some warning signs that a behavior is about to occur. It may be that we are so used to seeing behaviors throughout the day that we don't make the connection. Your child may exhibit some passive types of behaviors and then escalate

very quickly to either aggression or a socially unacceptable behavior. Your child may start to get antsy and squirm around, or she might get up and pace. These could be warning signs that something is about to happen. If you can discover these warning signs, then you can quickly provide the positive support needed, and the inappropriate behavior will not occur.

Q: *Aren't we giving in to what the child wants?*

A: On the surface, it appears that way. In fact most parents don't realize that responding to the old behavior also gives the child what he wants. Example: The parent may want the child to be able to sit quietly for 15 minutes while the parent watches TV. The child can't do it and becomes aggressive after five minutes. When this happens, everyone stops watching TV and turns their attention to the child. The child is now in control and has achieved what she wanted. She has everyone's attention, and no one is watching TV!

By compromising, everyone can be successful and have a win-win situation. If you discover your child can only sit for five minutes while you watch TV, tell your child that you are going to set the timer for five minutes and watch TV. When the timer goes off, you are going to stop watching TV and set the timer for five minutes of play with your child. Then repeat the process. After this has worked for a while, slowly increase the amount of time the child has to sit and wait, and then later you can decide if you want to decrease the amount of time you play with your child.

When using positive supports, a behavior is very rarely changed immediately. However, with opportunities for your child to be successful, and consistent use of the positive supports, your child will learn a more appropriate way to communicate his wants and needs, and the inappropriate behaviors will be replaced with appropriate and socially acceptable behaviors.

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